SPEECH ON THE AWARD OF HONORARY LIFE MEMBERSHIP OF THE REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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I wish to extend my sincere gratitude to all Board Members and staff of the Refugee Council of Australia in paying to me this great honour of being made an Honorary Life Member of the Refugee Council of Australia. I am in exalted company and I feel greatly privileged. Receiving this honour reminds me that I am at that time of life when such awards begin to arrive. Recently I celebrated my sixtieth birthday and received a message from one friend: "Welcome to old age!"

My involvement with the Refugee Council of Australia began through my interest in refugees and my membership of the International Commission of Jurists Australian section. I had previously been an Alderman on Woollahra Council and in that capacity had been the organiser for Woollahra for the annual Austcare community campaign. For those of you who don't know, Austcare was established by the giant of refugee work in Australia, Major General Paul Cullen. It stands for Australians Care for Refugees. Austcare had grown through its member organisations into the major agency providing support for refugees in emergency situations around the world. Those managing Austcare realised that complementary to their humanitarian work, there was a need for serious policy work in this controversial area. The policy side often brought those advocating for humanitarian policies into conflict with the powers-that-be. There was a need for a new organisation which could take up the principled fight and this led to the birth of the Refugee Council of Australia in 1981 out of Austcare. Its first Board comprised people associated with Austcare.

As mentioned, I had been active for some years with the Australian Section of the International Commission of Jurists, specialising in the affairs of Indonesia. In 1969 the international community to its shame endorsed the so-called "Act of Free Choice" under which 1,000 selected West Papuans were forced to put up their hands at gunpoint to say they supported the Indonesian annexation of their country. Thereafter commenced a war of independence which has attracted very little international publicity, although it is well-known to people of good will in this part of the world. The Indonesian military government under President Soeharto responded to the acts of defiance by the brave West Papuans with increasingly harsh measures which only entrenched the determination of the West Papuans to attempt to secure independence. From time to time waves of oppression have been unleashed in the province variously known as West Irian, Irian Jaya and West Papua. In 1984 tens of thousands of West Papuans voted with their feet by simply leaving their homes and crossing the traditional border into Papua New Guinea, a country to whom Australia has special obligations, given we were the colonial master. News began to filter through of a humanitarian nightmare on the border region and that people preferred to die in a free Papua New Guinea than return to an occupied West Papua. At that time PNG very much responded to the pressure from Australian administrations whose simple foreign policy approach in this region was appease Indonesia at all costs. The governments therefore adopted the approach that if we deny all aid to the refugees, it will starve them into submission and they will agree voluntarily to their homes in Indonesia. Nothing could be further from the truth and as I indicated, reports began to emerge of deaths from hunger and disease. The Australian Section of the ICJ, hearing

these reports, determined that it was appropriate to send a mission of inquiry to the remote Western regions of PNG and I was fortunate to be a member of this mission, in part because of my semi-fluency in the Indonesian language. Led by the Hon. John Dowd, AO QC, then leader of the Opposition in NSW and now, amongst other things, President of ActionAid Australia (the successor organisation of Austcare), six lawyers travelled for two weeks through the region following trails akin to the notorious Kokoda Trail to meet with and interview the refugees in their camps. The stark reality of what we saw and heard came as a cruel reminder of the fate of victims of human rights violations worldwide but so close to our border. We returned home, wrote up our report and I am pleased to say internationalised the plight of these forgotten people. Within weeks humanitarian aid was shipped in to the camps and embarrassed Australian and PNG governments were forced to accept the reality and do something to provide real support for the refugees. In due course the PNG government accepted a permanent mission from UNHCR and acceded to the Refugee Convention with some reservations. Many refugees remained in the East Awin and other resettlement areas in Papua New Guinea where they remain. There continues to be an ongoing issue in relation to the status of these people and indeed the ICJ is now considering a 30-year anniversary mission to find out what is happening.

This trip crystallised my direct interest in the plight of refugees. As a result of my participation in the mission, I was called on to address numerous public fora including some organised by the Refugee Council of Australia in 1984 and 1985. The ICJ was invited to be represented on the RCOA Board and this commenced my involvement as the ICJ representative, an involvement which as you know has continued to date.

Over the years that followed, I was honoured to serve not only continuously as a Board Member, but then to be Chair for five years and then President for ten, finally stepping down in 2006 to hand the reins over to my most able successor John Gibson.

So many events have taken place during the period of my involvement with the Council that it is impossible to list them all in this short time. However, significant memories of activities include:

1. The period in the early 1990s when we so angered the then eminently forgettable Minister for Immigration Gerry Hand by our hostility to amongst other things the mandatory detention program that his administration introduced, that he refused to speak to us for about 18 months. Finally, he conceded that he would talk to us and I recall him saying at that time: “I realise that if I don’t talk to you as the Refugee Council, I’ll have to just arrange for the creation of a new Refugee Council. Better the enemy I know!”

2. In 1997 the Refugee Council organised a delegation of Board Members to walk the corridors of power in Parliament House, Canberra talking to members and senators to lobby in the cause of a just and humane refugee program. This predated the Tampa crisis but post-dated the Pauline Hanson stirred media campaign of xenophobia. Amongst those I was fortunate to meet were Kevin Rudd, who was gracious and intelligent in his support for the cause we pleaded, and the notorious Pauline Hanson herself, who whilst being gracious, did not stop talking utter rubbish. I recall amongst other comments the comment she made that were we not aware of the national conspiracy to hide the truth about the refugee invasion. Boats are landing daily on the beaches of Darwin, she assured

us, and bodies were being washed ashore which were then being bulldozed into the waters by bulldozers which were lined up on the beaches near Darwin in the sand at nights. Her Alice in Wonderland fantasies were spoken with such conviction that we almost thought she actually believed what she was saying.

3. The Tampa crisis – So much has been written that there is little for me to say today, other than to express my amazement at the level of community support which the Howard government's lies spawned. Amongst others, Rural Australians for Refugees stands out as a noble group prepared to fight the just cause and to oppose the evil campaign of misinformation that Howard and his cronies publicly espoused. These and all those others who took part in that campaign well understood that evil flourishes when good people remain silent.

4. The Council was not without its internal problems and 2004/5 was particularly traumatic for members of staff and the Board. Unfortunately, circumstances led to the departure of our then Executive Director, Margaret Piper. Margaret, an intellectual giant, had followed well in the footsteps of her predecessor, Luke Hardy, the first Executive Director of the Council, and had brought great distinction to the work she had done and the name of the Council. I am pleased to say that my previous close relationship with Margaret has been restored and this has been a great cause of comfort to me. I am grateful for the support I received at that time from the Board, and in particular from Sky de Jersey, who helped us all through that most difficult time.

5. The creation of ARF - I see as perhaps my most abiding legacy the creation of the Australian Refugee Foundation which was born to ensure permanency of funding against the fickle dictates of government. No organisation should be beholden to one funding body and this is especially so for a national policy organisation such as the RCOA whose *raison d'etre* is to challenge those in power. Without the support of the late Professor Ken Rivett, another giant in Australian refugee history and one of the founders of the Indochinese Refugee Association and Quang Luu, the former head of SBS Radio and himself a refugee, and both fellow Honorary Life Members of the Council, the Foundation would not have secured the funding strength that it has achieved. Of course, there is always more work to be done in this and in my continuing role as a Trustee of the Foundation, I hope to continue to carry on this work for the benefit of the Council.

6. Spawning the creation of the RACS, STARTTS and ANCORW networks.

Of course, the work of a President is only as good as the support he or she receives from fellow Board Members and staff. In this, as I reported regularly in my annual reports, I was exceptionally lucky to have a dedicated and highly committed Board representing a multiplicity of interests and backgrounds, all of whom worked together to further our goals. Staff performed their duties with distinction and in addition to the two previously named CEOs, I also make special mention of the current CEO, Paul Power, whose appointment to the position should be considered as one of our outstanding achievements. He has continued by his tireless efforts to bring distinction to the Council at both a national and international level to the point that the Council could hold its head up high wherever we are present for the work that we are doing.

Twenty-seven years is of course a long period and it is always time to move on and to allow others to take up the mantle in their own distinctive manner. Board membership must not be a sinecure and there is always a need for renewal and regeneration.

I thank you for the honour that has been bestowed on me and remain committed to supporting the cause of the Council in the interests of course of those that we serve, the refugees whose needs unfortunately will remain with us whilesoever greed, paranoia and despotism exist.